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ABSTRACT

How and why perceptions of public schooling and private schooling have changed from the colonial period to the present are explored. When the U.S. public school system was created in the mid-19th century, it emerged out of the mixed private-public system of education that existed in the early years of the American republic. For nearly a century, the public schools enjoyed a relatively secure place in American culture. Over the long span of time, the schools gradually received nearly all the public tax dollars, and enjoyed broad public and political support. Each generation of Americans from the 19th century to the present has produced its share of public school critics, but until recently most Americans believed that the schools could be reformed. Schools changed radically in the 20th century in response to the modernization of American society. Citizens are angry for many reasons, including the federal government's role in school policy formation and the secularization, centralization, and professionalization of schools. Whether the public schools will be forced to share tax dollars with the private schools and lose their near monopoly may well be determined in the next decade. (RM)

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CHANGING CONCEPTIONS OF "PUBLIC" AND "PRIVATE" IN AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

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Changing Conceptions of "Public"
and "Private" in American Education History

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon diverse sources in the history of American education, this essay examines changing perspectives on "public" and "private" in our educational past. The essay explores how and why perceptions of these concepts have changed from the colonial period to the present. In particular, it examines how the modern public school system emerged in the nineteenth century, how that development altered the mixed public-private educational traditions of previous years, and why many educational policy leaders of the past few decades are revising our notions of public and private schooling.

Something rather remarkable has occurred in the recent history of American education: a rediscovery of the public benefits of private education. The idea is an old one in our history, but it has not been seriously entertained by mainstream political leaders or policy makers since the early nineteenth century. When dissident Protestants, non-sectarian private school leaders, and Roman Catholics in particular protested against the monopolistic nature of public schooling by the mid-nineteenth century, they were maligned for their ideas and defeated in efforts to divide the school fund for their competing systems of education. In effect, the public school system became a virtual monopoly, and private networks of schooling existed without direct state fiscal support. The public school, and not its private counterpart, became for most Americans the symbol of American democracy. And seemingly, for over a century, the public interest was best served by the expansion and proliferation of tax-supported, compulsory, and majoritarian sponsored public schools.

Unlike the public leaders of the nineteenth century, a wide range of intellectuals, religious figures, and elected officials in Washington now publicize the benefits of private, not public, education. Whereas the famous nineteenth-century common school reformer, Horace Mann, believed that education should not be left to the whims of private enterprise or to the capriciousness of parents, market-place solutions today abound as a panacea for American education. Competition in education, it is often asserted, will produce high academic achievement, strong moral character, and overall excellence in schooling; at the same time, it will force the declining public schools to achieve their highest potential.

Exactly how did the public schools acquire their once generally accepted dominance in American culture? Why have Americans rediscovered an old notion, once commonly held in earlier periods of our history, that private education should play an integral if not central role in schooling? An examination of historical research on the changing popular conceptions of "public" and "private" education in the American experience from the colonial period to the present can produce some tentative answers to these questions.

EDUCATION IN COLONIAL AMERICA AND EARLY REPUBLIC

The creation of public school systems in the nineteenth century -- state controlled, compulsory, hierarchical, and standardized -- stood in contrast to patterns of education that existed throughout the colonial and early national periods of American history (Katz, 1975). For no "system" of education per se existed in America during these periods, and modern definitions of "public" and "private" when applied to education were virtually non-existent. As Bernard Bailyn has written, "The modern conception of public education, the very idea of a clean line of separation between 'private' and 'public', was unknown before the end of the eighteenth century." (Bailyn, p. 11). The newly ratified federal Constitution had no specific provisions for state-supported education or school systems, contributing to the decentralized and local patterns of education that continued to prevail after independence (Kaestle, 1983).

While we are accustomed today to think in terms of the power of state, public systems of education, the family served as the basic source of education and socialization before the nineteenth century (Bailyn; Cremin, 1970). The dominant nuclear family was both the center of biological reproduction

and material production, and it also served as an educational center. Parents normally taught their children reading and letters; apprenticeship programs were family based; and together with the church, neighborhood, and surrounding community, the family was basic to colonial life. This was true of the tightly-bound Puritan villages of New England, of the Quakers, Mennonites, and other religious groups of the Middle Colonies, and of the more geographically dispersed peoples of the colonial South (Cremin, 1970).

Schools existed as arms of local government, particularly in the seat of learning in the New World: New England. But the early school laws of seventeenth-century Massachusetts, which called for the creation of various levels of schools in response to population growth, were widely ignored and unenforceable (Axtell). Whether in New England, the Middle Colonies, or the South -- and regional differences would long prevail in schooling -- schools were an irregular, incidental, and unsystematic part of a child's life. Schools were usually attended only for a few years, and most often only by boys during the regular school term. The curriculum, shaped most decidedly by local religious sentiment, aimed to transmit basic literacy skills, foremost among them the ability to read in order to comprehend the Bible. In the largely Anglo-Protestant civilization that developed in the New World, schools shared the larger purposes of education and socialization deemed appropriate by community standards (Cremin, 1970; Axtell; Frost).

Modern distinctions between "public" and "private" in the world of education did not exist in the colonial period or even in the early national period. Many town schools, for example, were funded with modest tax support as well as the head taxes or tuition paid by the parents of school children (Axtell). At the same time, private venture schools existed in many large

towns and cities. A private schoolmaster in a growing metropolis like New York City or Philadelphia might open a pay school that offered a wide array of subjects, from cartography to mathematics, in response to local demand (Kaestle, 1973). Citizens assumed that the teacher was performning a "public" function and offering a "public" education in the sense that all who could afford the tuition could presumably attend. A dame "school" operated in an individual's home, a writing "school" found above a tannery, and other forms of individually-inspired educational enterprise exemplified the thin lines separating public and private during these years.

SCHOOLING AND NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

Certainly, religious sentiment remained uppermost in the work of voluntary organizations devoted to school formation after the American Revolution, and the activities of these groups highlight the close ties that existed between "private" organizations and "public" schooling that continued into the early 1800s. Carl Kaestle's new book, Pillars of the Republic, demonstrates how in city after city, in response to ethnically and religiously diverse populations and attendant fears of poverty and criminality, Anglo-Protestant voluntary groups built charity schools for the children of the poor and culturally different. As these privately controlled organizations received more and more public tax dollars, they in effect laid the basis of our modern public school system (Kaestle, 1983).

In New York City, whose schools have been closely studied by historians, the Free School Society assembled in 1805 and gained the support of a broad range of elite, philanthropic Protestants. In an attempt to inculcate in the children of the poor the values of morality and Protestant Christianity, this private Society used tax monies to build what became the basis for public

education in New York City. First Baptists in the 1820s and then Catholics in the 1840s in celebrated battles called for a division of the school fund for their respective educational institutions -- to no avail. Only by the time of the Civil War did modern distinctions between "public" and "private" education gradually develop in New York City and in other sections of the nation (Kaestle, 1973; Ravitch; Lannie).

New York's experience illuminates the larger phenomenon of the nineteenth century: the rise of state monopolies in education, sanctioned by law, that existed across the nation by roughly the Civil War (Cremin, 1951). In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the lines between public and private education still remained blurred. Philanthropic, usually interdenominational Protestant voluntary associations that engaged in mass education were not the only groups that received various forms of public support and funding. "Private" colleges like Harvard in the 1800s were often controlled by "private" boards of control and yet still received some public monies from the legislature during different years. Even Dartmouth received some public funding after the celebrated Dartmouth Case of 1819 (Whitehead).

Secondary education in the nineteenth century also had a mixed public-private quality. Academies, which were popular institutions that served as the predecessors of the modern high school and secondary instruction, received a mixture of tax support, public grants, private bequests, tuition payments, and the like (Sizer). "States conceived of academies as public institutions in the early national period," writes Michael B. Katz, "'public' implied the performance of broad social functions and the services of a large, heterogeneous clientele rather than control and ownership by the community or state." (Katz,

1975, p. 23). Only with the rise of true state systems of education in the Civil War period would modern notions of "private" and "public" systems obtain.

Enormous social changes were unleashed after the 1790s that contributed greatly to the rise of the modern public school monopoloy in the mid-nineteenth century. The informal, irregular, unsystematic method of schooling that characterized the colonial period gradually disappeared during the nineteenth century. Formal institutions, not families, soon became the chief mechanism of education and socialization, and a single state supported system of age-graded, compulsory schooling emerged in every state of the Union. The press, the church, the labor union, and other forms of education and socialization continued to shape American culture, yet the modern public school system emerged as the focal point in the lives of most American youth (Cremin, 1970).

Schools were not particularly novel institutions in America by the 1830s, but school "systems" that monopolized public monies and forced a new clarity between "public" and "private" in educational matters were (Katz, 1975). In state after state, constitutions were drafted requiring the establishment of public schools, and local systems of public education emerged that eliminated the ability of "private" teachers, academies, colleges, and charity schools to receive public tax dollars. Competition in education still existed, but without the benefit of tax dollars. A public system of education arose that gathered the majority of children into its embrace, that attempted to advance the culture of an Anglo-American civilization, and, most importantly, viewed "private" schooling as unAmerican, alien to the national interest, and culturally divisive (Katz, 1968; Kaestle, 1983).

Horace Mann, the most famous nineteenth-century common school reformer, criticized private schooling on many fronts, anticipating many of the arguments of public educators today. Private academies, he warned, were hostile to public education, since he believed that they catered to the privileged few. And he similarly condemned charity schooling for giving all forms of public education -- education that would reach all classes, especially the poor -- a pauper stigma. Education, warned Mann, should not be abandoned "to the hazards of private enterprise, or to parental will, ability, or caprice." (Cremin, 1957, p. 107). Moreover, reflecting the heady nationalism of his times, he feared that "the tendency of the private school system is to assimilate our modes of education to those of England, where churchmen and dissenters -- each according to its own creed -- maintain separate schools, in which children are taught, from their tenderest years to wield the sword of polemics with fatal dexterity . . ." (Cremin, 1957, p. 33).

Soon "public" education became equated with state-controlled education, similar to the way the term is used today. Horace Mann's fellow school reformer in Massachusetts, George Boutwell, defined public school in an increasingly accepted way: "A public school I understand to be a school established by the public -- supported chiefly or entirely by the public, controlled by the public, and accessible to the public under terms of equality, without special charge for tuition." (Katz, 1975, pp. 27-28). A contributor to the American Journal of Education in 1873 provided a more elaborate and refined definition. Public schools, he wrote, are state sponsored and reach all children in rural and urban areas, where they receive a common training in similar subjects and good citizenship. Schooling was "public" if "it is established by the State through agencies of its providing, conducted according to the

rules of its authorization, supported by funds protected or furnished by its legislation, accessible to the children of all citizens upon terms of equality, and subject to such inspection as the law may institute." ("Common Schools and Public Instruction")

The reasons for the growth of the public school monopoly were diverse and controversial but are not incomprehensible. Already in the 1780s and 1790s, national leaders from Benjamin Rush to Thomas Jefferson called for finely articulated systems of education in the various states. Schools, they argued, would teach a diverse, newly independent people common moral principles, allegiance to the new nation, a standardized language, and the basic citizenship skills required as America moved from provincial to national status (Rudolph, 1965). Yet, despite the heady nationalism that infused the thinking of prominent Founding Fathers, schooling remained a local affair: decentralized, ungraded, and controlled by lay people who still often viewed the family as the key element in a child's education.

While a growing national fervor slowly developed, particularly in the key New England states, the emerging state monopoly in education is even more strongly explained by the Second Great Awakening that began in the 1790s. The Awakening was a response by evangelical Protestants to the threat of egalitarianism fostered by the French Revolution, to the decline of church membership immediately after 1776, and particularly to the rise of deism and rationalistic thought during these years (Mathews). For while the Founding Fathers called for national systems of education, the Constitution provided no such provisions; hence, the task of constructing schools fell upon many of the leading Protestant evangelicals, who built organizations that would influence school formation and their systematization through the Civil War years.

As mentioned previously, Protestant charity school proponents like the Free School Society fashioned a system of public education in New York City out of private and public funds. Across the land in the early 1800s, in both rural and urban areas, similar Protestant groups proselytized in behalf of public education (Tyack, 1966; 1970; Smith). As the schools came to teach a selective, non-denominational version of Protestant Christianity, conflict emerged between native Protestants and immigrant Catholics and a tiny minority of Protestants who believed in keeping with the colonial tradition that the church, not the state, should control all formal education (Bodo; Curran). Evangelical Protestants, however, lobbied successfully for the use of the King James version of the Bible as a common school text, which when combined with daily (Protestant) prayer helped inculcate proper norms of morality and religion in public school children (Cremin, 1980).

Catholics balked at this compromise by the major Protestant groups to use standard though clearly Protestant reading materials, but in the end Protestant lobbyists in state after state guaranteed that only a single "public" system of education received "public" tax dollars. Hence there arose the now familiar divisions between "public" and "private" schooling that is currently being redefined and reconceptualized today, as Catholics in particular constructed their own privately financed school systems. "Public" schools were expected to transmit common Protestant values to all children, to address the problems of an emerging urban, industrial, and ethnically diverse people, and to spread a common faith in national progress and destiny (Cremin, 1980; Katz, 1968; Kaestle, 1973). The Protestant activists who built the public school system therefore entrusted the schools with multiple roles, linking education with national development and growth. And they widely believed that

Protestants like themselves would continue to control the schools long into the future.

And so competing systems of schooling emerged -- one labelled public, the other private -- and those distinctions would remain fixed elements in political and educational policy discussion until quite recently. By the late nineteenth century, the vast majority of public attention, sentiment, and of course funding went to the public schools, and gradually private education lost its once prominent role in education. Public high schools by the 1880s replaced academies as the main arena of secondary instruction; public school boards assumed the role of private voluntary associations and built truly public schools out of charity institutions; and only elite, independent, non-sectarian secondary and elementary schools survived the growth of the public school monopoly (Krug; James). American Catholics, of course, built the largest segment of sectarian private schooling in the nation, and they were repeatedly repudiated in their efforts to receive public tax support.

SCHOOLING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "private" education remained a term of derision in public policy discourse. People who sent their children to non-public schools of any sort were variously attacked as religiously devisive, elitist, unAmerican, undemocratic, and so forth. Catholics in particular were singled out for building their own parochial school system. Leading Protestants assailed the continuing political and religious power of Catholic immigrants in America. Even politicians like Theodore Roosevelt chastized those who wanted to divide the school fund, and others attacked Catholics for complaining that taxation without representation

had become a fact of educational life. One New York City public school advocate, writing in a leading educational journal in 1880, accused American Catholics of following blindly the word of a foreign despot, the Pope, who "has ordered the destruction of our free non-sectarian system of popular education, and the substitution of his own free non-sectarian system of church or parochial schools . . ." (Hawkins). Parochial schools in foreign countries, he added, were not only divisive but spawned illiteracy, pauperism, criminality, and political graft. The public interest in America could hardly be served well by expanding the private school sector.

Given the relatively secure position that public schooling held in American culture by the turn of the twentieth century, the recent movement to dismantle the public school monopoly through tuition tax credits and vouchers constitutes a major shift in popular political and educational thought. Individuals from a wide range of ideological perspectives now hold critical perspectives on public schooling that were unthinkable in the early 1900s. Competition in education should be reevaluated in the light of new historical conditions, noted Christopher Jencks in 1966, and he warned that "Educators have taught us to use 'public' as a synonym for 'democratic' or just plain 'good', and to associate 'private' with 'elitist' and 'inequality.'" (Jencks, p. 243). What were the historical conditions that led many Americans to seek more competition in education? To comprehend the changing conceptions of "public" and "private" education that have evolved in the past few decades requires an understanding of the changing functions of public education throughout the course of the twentieth century.

Public education underwent significant changes in the period from 1900 to the present. In the long run these changes would lead many people to

question the wisdom of a single state-controlled system of education to promote the cause of private schooling. The rise of the federal government in educational affairs, for example, led to changes that encouraged many citizens to endorse tuition tax credits and school vouchers to break the public school monopoly. While some citizens opposed federal intervention, others attacked the increasingly secular nature of public education. This occurred as Protestant control of the schools diminished, as twentieth-century education responded to the modern trend of elite control, centralization, and professionalization. By the end of the 1970s, some private school spokespersons built upon these various forms of disenchantment to lead a full-scale assault on the public schools.

The increased federal role in educational policy became most dramatic in the 1960s and 1970s and has fueled a revival of interest in private education. Precedents for federal involvement in schooling, of course, stretched back to the early years of the Republic (Kaestle, 1983; Kaestle and Smith). The federal government had provided some educational leadership through the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, which promised but largely failed to provide some monies from land sales for educational purposes. During the Civil War, efforts to establish a cabinet level department of education failed, as advocates of local and state control over education triumphed over those who conceived of a national system of education (Warren). The federal government did, of course, aid mass education through the establishment of land grant colleges and through the creation of ephemeral Freedman's schools for the newly liberated black slaves (Rudolph, 1962; Jones). During World War I as well, in response to a perceived manpower crisis, the Smith-Hughes Act provided aid to vocational and agricultural education programs (Krug;

Lazerson and Grubb). Soon the federal role in educational policy would grow so dramatically in the eyes of some people that they would attack this development as unconsitutional, subversive of state's rights, and harmful of sound educational systems.

Federal intervention in school affairs after 1945 was a response to two different developments: the Cold War and the emerging Civil Rights movement (Spring, 1976). During World War I, as in earlier years, the schools promoted the national cause through victory gardens, Americanization programs, and a heightened level of patriotic activities generally through all levels of education. With the rise of anti-communism in general and the federal response to the Soviet Sputniks in the late 1950s in particular, Congressional leaders with the support of President Dwight D. Eisenhower fashioned the National Defense Education Act (1958). This act provided leadership for curriculum development in the sciences, mathematics, foreign languages, and those humanistic subjects deemed essential to the national interest and global hegemony (Clouse).

Federal involvement in education further accelerated in the 1960s despite Republican opposition and the growing sense of many Americans that, constitutionally as well as practically, the individual states and not Washington should control public schooling. Out of Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs came not only an expansion of the powers of H.E.W. but also the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), compensatory programs like Head Start and Upward Bound, and additional legislation for affirmative action, bilingual-bicultural education, and greater educational opportunity generally (Kaestle and Smith; Jeffries). Throughout the 1970s, militant conservatives of all persuasions attacked all of this federal "meddling" in school affairs,

while calling for constitutional amendments for school prayers (banned in 1962 and 1963) and against mandatory court-ordered busing.

Besides responding to the Cold War fervor of the 1950s and 1960s, the federal government was faced with responding to the imperatives of the Civil Rights movement. This, too, fueled interest in private education in some quarters. Growing out of prominent efforts by blacks during the New Deal period for more equality, the Civil Rights movement was energized by the Brown decision (1954), which ruled segregated schools unconstitutional (Kluger). The power of the Office of Education and later H.E.W. increased rapdily by the mid-1960s, and districts that refused to comply with desegregation orders were denied federal funds, which were slowly growing as a percentage of school budgets since World War II (Kaestle and Smith). What started as an effort to integrate public schools became another force encouraging a more popular perception of private education.

If the rise of the federal government in school policy formation served as a major stimulus to modern assaults on public schooling, current demands for "public" support for "private" education also reflects a broader shift in popular attitudes. As indicated earlier, the public schools of the nineteenth century served many different social and political functions, especially the task of transmitting non-denominational, Protestant moral values to all children. Protestants served in all of the key educational and administrative posts in local schools, and yet the schools of the early twentieth century gradually became more secular, expert controlled, and centralized. The state system of education -- so widely praised by the vast majority of nineteenth-century Protestants as supportive of a common faith -- now seemed inimical to a wide variety of fundamentalist Protestants (Reese).

During the turn of the twentieth century, the face of public education changed dramatically. Together with the growth of federal intervention later in the century, numerous changes occurred that contributed to the rising crescendo of public school criticism so characteristic of our times. The basic changes in the schools -- evident even today -- included the growing centralization of power in the hands of school superintendents, the enhanced professional training of the teaching staff, the growth of vocational training (and not moral development per se) as a key aim of education, and the overall secularization of the schools, highlighted best perhaps by the banning of state-sponsored prayer in the early 1960s (Tyack, 1970; Spring, 1972; and Cremin, 1961).

The new, corporate character of schools in the early 1900s was largely a response to the evolution of a corporate economic structure and to the continual growth of an urban-industrial civilization transformed by waves of immigration (Bowles and Gintis). Instead of emphasizing the values of the nineteenth-century school -- basic Protestant morality linked with rudimentary literacy skills -- modern educational systems prepared students for life with specialized curricula, administered increasingly by well-trained professionals. Degree-holding school superintendents, not the laymen on the school boards, increasingly set policy. School boards themselves were centralized, as small, at-large, boards replaced the large, ward-based school boards of many cities after 1900 (Tyack, 1973; Spring, 1972). The trend was repeated in rural areas, where school districts were consolidated, where superintendents replaced lay board members as powerful figures, and where a more scientific curricula replaced the older training once available in the one-room school (Fuller).

When the public school system emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, leading Protestants assumed that the schools would always be solely theirs. As long as they remained in control, private sectarian schooling would largely be perceived as Catholic, and therefore opposed by most Americans. Protestants obviously could not anticipate how public schools would radically change in the twentieth century in response to the modernization of American society. Evangelical Protestants did, however, lash out in the early twentieth century at what seemed to be the Godless, atheistic, secular ways of the public schools. But they continued to support public over private education. Mandatory prayer and Bible reading bills were passed by rural (and largely Protestant) dominated legislatures, and religious leaders like Billy Sunday assailed the drift toward vocationalism in schools. Vocational programs seemed like one more sign of the coming of a materialistic, Godless state (Reese).

Hostility to private education continued into the 1920s, when the very survival of parochial schools was questioned in the state of Oregon. Certainly the idea of providing public monies for private education during this period was virtually unthinkable. Oregon's Protestant activists passed legislation requiring all children to attend public schools, in an attempt to destroy the parochial school system. Backed by the Ku Klux Klan as an act of high patriotism, the legislation was finally ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1925 in the famous Pierce decision (Tyack, 1968; James). The Court endorsed the idea of state mandated school attendance but continued the tradition of parental choice in whether or not children attended public or private schools. Clearly, private (and Catholic) schools were protected by this ruling, yet the larger issue of the role of "private" and "public"

schools in American society would remain a leading political and educational concern throughout the remainder of the twentieth century.

Many of the arguments heard today in favor of returning to more mixed public-private school systems like those of the early American republic were already debated in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. In a wide range of journals and in the popular press, advocates for both sides asked whether private schools produced better students, whether private education was divisive, undemocractic, and elitist, and whether the public interest was best met by preserving a state monopoly or by expanding the private sector (LaFarge; Sherman; Reinert; Meyer; O'Connor; Douglas; Martin; Kandel; "Are Private Schools Better?"). These studies clearly lacked the sophistication of recent studies on private education, but they raised new questions about the role of public and private education in American life (Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore).

As more public monies indirectly reached more private schools through various student aid programs after World War II, many citizens recognized that once accepted ideas of "public" and "private" education might be outdated. A contributor to the Nation's Schools in 1955, commenting upon the effects of the G.I. Bill, school lunch programs, and other new federal programs that aided both public and non-public schools, stated that "We do not have clear-cut conceptions of the respective roles of public and private education." (Hamlin). A writer in School and Society in 1958 similarly noted that there was a new atmosphere for discussing the relative merits of private education. "Many recent discussions of private education," he asserted, "have stressed its public character. Indeed, some have recommended that the term 'private' as applied to other than public schools should be abandoned because of

historical and sociological connotations of the term." (Kohlbrenner). These writers anticipated those who today routinely urge us to "appreciate the contribution of nonpublic schools to the commonwealth." (D'Alessio; Gaffney).

Before 1945, support for public aid for private education was primarily endorsed by particular Roman Catholic pressure groups, but a strong reaction by many citizens to federal intervention, the civil rights movement, and the greater secularism of public education broadened its appeal. The idea that aid to parochial education was a violation of separation of church and state seemed undermined as well by the rise of the "child benefit" theory after the 1940s, which simply stated that various forms of indirect public aid to private school children benefitted students, not churches. And so public monies were funneled into private schools for school lunches, to defray transportation costs, and so forth. What had once been mostly a "Catholic" issue -- public aid for private education -- now became a devisive national issue because of these changes in the nature of public policy toward schooling.

The individuals and groups that support more competition in education are a decidedly mixed lot. Not all Catholics support public aid to private education, and not all Christian fundamentalists in favor of private education seek public funds. Moreover, many independent schools without sectarian affiliations oppose government aid and the regulations and bureaucracy that invariably attach themselves to schools tied to the federal purse. But by the 1960s and 1970s an array of sometimes basically dissimilar groups -- school voucher advocates of the 1960s like Christopher Jencks, libertarians opposed to all forms of state intervention, free market capitalists like Milton Friedman, and traditional Catholic lobbies plus new Christian school lobbies -- came to rediscover the need to force public schools to compete with

the private sector in a way that would have caused the founding fathers of mass education in the nineteenth century to shudder (Coons and Sugarman). Public schools have always had their critics. Never before, however, have so many people organized so well to threaten the monopoly of public education.

CONCLUSION

Whether citizens are angry because of the specter of federal control, racial desegregation, secular humanism, the decline in test scores, teacher unionism, or even the concept of a monopoly for education in a free market, capitalistic society, Americans may have reached a crossroads in their thinking about the role of "public" and "private" education. For the first time in the twentieth century, we have a President who openly endorses private education through the endorsement of tuition tax credits and school voucher plans. Whether the plea is "back to basics," back to old time standards, or back to whatever seemed better in the past, a wide range of activists from different parts of the political spectrum believes that quality education requires a greater mix of public and private education and that the public schools for too long enjoyed a privileged place in American educational policy.

When our public school system was created in the mid-nineteenth century, it emerged out of the mixed private-public system of education that existed in the early years of the American republic. And, for nearly a century, the public schools enjoyed a relatively secure place in American culture. Over that long span of time, the schools gradually received nearly all the public tax dollars, assured that private schooling would be a small part of the total education in the country, and enjoyed broad public and political support. Each generation of Americans from the nineteenth century to the present has

produced its share of public school critics, but until recently most Americans believed that the schools could be reformed. That common faith was lost within the past few decades, and the reconceptualization of private and public education over the past few decades reflects this basic fact.

For nearly a century, Americans generally shared a vision of educating children together in a common school system. That vision was imperfectly translated into practice, but the American public school system stood as one of the most viable accomplishments of social policy. The schools assumed the job of assimilating immigrants, of reducing inequality by identifying the talented poor, and of otherwise introducing youth on a graduated scale to values needed to survive in a democratic society that was pluralistic and oriented in theory to competition. The public schools may have always promised more than they could have reasonably been expected to deliver. At the same time, as water cannot rise higher than its source, schools cannot perform tasks the larger society cannot solve.

Whether the public schools will be forced to share tax dollars and lose their near monopoly may well be determined in the next decade. For many individuals for the past few decades have forced us to redefine the place of public and private education in American life. Is the nation better served by educational institutions that try to teach universal values or those of a narrower group, sect, or community? Should policy be oriented to maximizing the amount of freedom religious fundamentalists and other groups exercise in matters related to their children's education? Will direct aid to religious groups through voucher plans or tax credits constitute a direct violation of the separation of church and state? And will most of the problems commonly seen in contemporary public education become resolved with the expansion of

the private sector? The fate of public and private education in contemporary American culture will be determined greatly by how well our citizenry, intellectuals, educators, and elected officials answer these questions.

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